

CASTLEMAINE NATURALIST

APRIL '88 #133



WE COUNT THE BROLGAS

During the month of March, Brolgas tend to congregate in a few localities, and disperse after the autumn rains. This makes counting of the Brolga population feasible.

Brolgas seem to favour areas close to swamps, and the Willaura district is ideal in this respect. Aerial photographs of the area to have some resemblance to the surface of the moon, with very numerous lakes and swamps scattered plentifully over the region.

On Saturday 26th of March, the count was organised by Gavin Cerini of the Ballarat CF & L. Nine cars, and twenty eight counters assembled at mid-day at the Willaura recreation ground. Each car was allocated an area and provided with a map showing the area to be surveyed.

We set out to our area, and carefully surveyed likely and unlikely spots, and examined all sheep, stumps, tanks and magpies, in case these should be Brolgas in disguise. After traversing the roads in our area, and some out of our area, we returned to Willaura. Our count of zero exactly matched those of the others already back.

Fortunately, the two last cars back were successful, and the birds were not along back roads but the main highway. At the first stop we were able to watch 22 Brolgas as they fed along one of the fence lines. A little further on we saw another eight, four of which were flying. This made a total of twenty eight, or exactly equal to the number of counters. We resolved there and then to return next time with many more people, perhaps a thousand or so.

Some of the watchers later on saw another 22 birds, which made the total 50 birds, a pleasing result even if it makes the arithmetic messy.

We were not the only Brolga watchers. Another car was searching out their location and erecting "NO SHOOTING" signs in the vicinity of the birds. Perhaps most duck shooters would recognise and protect Brolgas, but certainly shooting anywhere near them is to be avoided.

Returning home through Ararat we noticed the striking avenue of Cup Gum in full flower. Perhaps it would make a very suitable street tree for Castlemaine, and could well be planted under power lines where a small growing tree is desired.

CHANGING THE MINES ACT

The Government has plans to change the Mines Act. This is expected to change the ease with which a mine can commence operation, and also the methods of recompense for private landholders, and the procedures for mines on public land.

The Department of Industries, Technology and Resources has published a booklet about the way in which decisions about changes will be made. The booklet is called "Review of the Mines Act 1958 - Issues for Public Consultation." The Club has several copies of the booklet, and further copies can be obtained from the Department of Industries, Technology and Resources - there is an office in Bendigo. Some copies can be obtained from E. Perkins.

A number of submissions have already been received, and these have formed the basis of the booklet. The booklet summarises the main concerns of landowners, mining groups, land protection associations, and conservation groups. The booklet is released for public comment. Closing date for comment is May 31st, 1988. The comments received will be incorporated in a more comprehensive Green Paper which will outline options for change. It is anticipated that this paper will be released in the middle of the year. Following public consideration of the green paper, a white paper will be prepared outlining the governments preferred options. The white paper should be released towards the end of 1988. The new mines act will be drafted following the white paper.

All Club members are urged to read the booklet. This Club plans to respond, and a special Club meeting will be held on Thurs 14th April to consider the submission. The Club will also send representatives to the special meeting of the W.V.F.N.C.A. in Maryborough a week later.

SOWTHISTLE (*Sonchus oleraceus*)

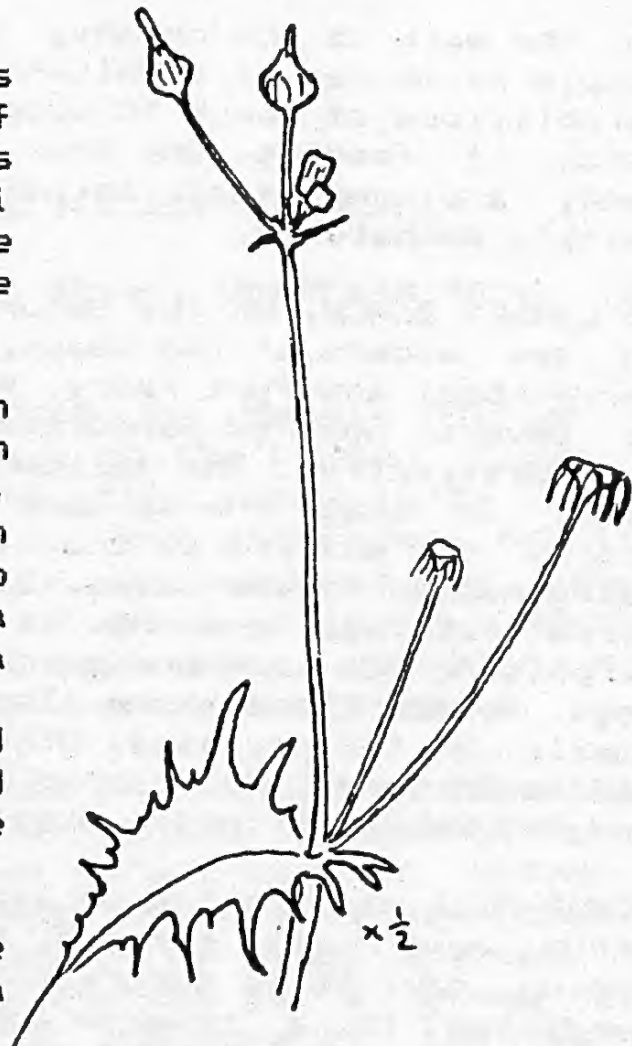
A surprising number of our weeds, both introduced and exotic, are edible. Over the past 100 years, the range of vegetables usually eaten by Europeans, and Australians, has declined dramatically. Many of the plants we now look on as weeds were once part of a normal diet, and were grown or collected, and often sold in markets or by hawkers.

This month's weed, Sowthistle, was used both by Europeans and Aborigines as a staple food. Most botanical books list Sow Thistle as being introduced, but it is now regarded as a native species. The ancestors of the Sowthistles growing in your garden may be native Australian, or English, or from some other European country.

Sowthistle is also known as Milk Thistle, on account of the milky sap. The leaves are serrated with small spines. The flowers are yellow, and unlike the true thistles, are not spiny.

Sowthistle is a common garden weed, and can often be found along roadsides, and along streets. I can usually find a sample or two in my garden. When we had a resident family of Guinea Pigs, Sowthistle was one of their favourite treats, and almost any other food would be left in favour of the thistle.

The young leaves can be eaten in salads, but have a rather bitter taste.



The cooked leaves are however, soft and palatable, (if the spines are trimmed off) and have been used as in this way for thousands of years. According to Pliny, Theseus ate a meal of Sowthistle before going to meet the Minotaur. Young peeled stalks may also be eaten.

Perhaps some readers may care to collect seeds, and grow Sow Thistle as a garden vegetable. Comments from those trying out this plant would also be appreciated.

WARRNAMBOOL CAMPOUT

Four members of the Castlemaine F.N.C. attended the March campout of the Western Victoria Field Naturalists Clubs Association at Warrnambool.

MUTTON BIRD COLONY. The Mutton Bird colony is at Griffith Island at Port Fairy. We assembled at the colony at dusk, and waited until the birds started to arrive. The sight of the circling birds, often flying only a metre or so above our heads, before entering their burrows, was an unforgettable experience. Local watchers said that the number of birds seen was less than usual. The chicks had hatched in mid-January, and as the chicks become older the time between feeds becomes progressively greater. Parents have been known to forage as far as 1,500 km from the nest, and the chick may wait for up to a fortnight before being fed.

On the walk to the colony, we were able to move to a couple of metres of a White-faced Heron, that seemed to be oblivious of about 30 people. It was interesting to watch it feeding. One foot was used to stir up the sand, and any small animal hiding in the sand was quickly despatched.

KILLARNEY BEACH. On the Saturday morning we were taken to see waders at the beach, almost half way between Warrnambool and Port Fairy. We were lucky to see flocks of several hundred Sanderlings. These tiny waders are most distinctive. They follow the waves as they ebb and flow, so that we were able to watch the birds scurry to and fro as they feed on the sand that is being washed by the waves. Bird books often show these birds running, and this is very appropriate. It is surprising to see how quickly they can move on tiny legs. Hooded Plover were also very numerous. They were mostly on the dry sand. Other waders included Double Banded Dotterel, Red-capped Dotterel, Ruddy Turnstones and Red-necked Stints. A quite memorable morning.

TOWER HILL was visited on Saturday afternoon. The water birds were quite nervous, having had a rather disturbing day. It is surprising that shooting should be permitted in a reserve such as Tower Hill. It was noticeable how much the trees had grown since my last visit. Grey Fantails were particularly plentiful, and in a walk of several kilometres there was scarcely a time when some were not visible.

WARRNAMBOOL. Lake Pertobe had a large population of water birds. The lake is in the centre of the town, and can be reached by crossing the railway tracks near the station. Here two hides have been built. In one we were only a couple of metres from an Eastern Swamp hen. We

were able to watch it biting pieces off, and eating, what looked to be a club-rush. Two White-fronted Chats were even closer. Stilts were quite numerous, and some Greenshanks were also seen.

RALPH ILLIDGE SANCTUARY. The sanctuary is east of Warrnambool, almost south of Terang. During the Ash Wednesday fires, it was burned out. It is hard now to see signs of the fire, except by noting that the bush is very dense. Like Angahook, it would be hard to wander off one of the pathways. We were at the sanctuary at about mid-day, and not many birds were in evidence. A visit earlier in the morning or late afternoon would be well worthwhile.

The whole weekend was well organised and enjoyable. Perhaps at some of the future campouts we will have a dozen or more attending from Castlemaine.

LODDON RIVER EXCURSION

[An excursion to the Loddon River, upstream from Cairn Curran on 13/3/88]

Once again we were indebted to Maggie Oliver for finding a beautiful stretch of the Loddon River and guiding Club members to it. Like many parts of the Eddington area, the river is lined with some beautiful red gums. One in particular was measured to have a circumference at the base of about 10 metres. Most of the trees were growing in a depression, caused no doubt by the flood waters swirling around the base.

There were not many plants in flower. A few Spear Thistles still had some of their beautiful purple flowers. Rushes and sedges were flowering along the river's edge. One of the most attractive was the Bog Club-rush. It grows to about 50 cm high, and has dark brown flower clusters at the end of a green stem. Cumbungi had a few flowers, and some of the Verbena bushes had blue flowers. Gorse, as usual was in flower and there were a few flowers on one of the Wirildas along the river.

Blackberries were found in several spots along the river, but the berries were not ripe enough to eat. One bush of Black Nightshade had ripe black berries, and these were eaten and judged to be rather tasty.

Birds seen for the afternoon were

White faced heron - one only at the farm dam
Australian Grebe - juvenile on the dam
Magpies - common along the river
Brown falcon - single example only
Galahs - several small flocks seen
Swallows - Some with downy feathers
Scissors Grinders - a group of three
Noisy Miners - in red gums
Striated Pardalotes - heard in the tree tops
Kookaburra - another bird heard, in the distance
Blue Wrens - in reeds, and on thistles
White cockatoos - several small flocks seen and heard
Corellas - some mixed with Cockatoo flocks
White-plumed Honeyeaters - several seen in trees
Red-rumped Parrots - several small flocks seen
Blackbird - in cover of a willow at water's edge
Pied Cormorant - seen along river by D. Plant
Tree Martins - hawking along edge of river
Brown Treecreepers - several seen
Black-faced Cuckoo Shrike - observed by K. Oliver
Sacred Ibis - at dam on return trip
Yellow-rump pardalote - at ford on return trip.

The return trip was via two fords at the southern tip of Laanacoorie reservoir. There was too much water flowing over the fords to make crossing a prudent activity. Here in a distance of a few metres are two fords and a bridge. Certainly a place for a further visit.

Leading north from here, we took Mock Orange Lane, to lead to the Eddington - Maldon Road. Mock Orange road is well worth a visit, being lined with some splendid specimens of Osage Orange.

SUBSCRIPTIONS FOR 1988

Pensioner/student	\$3	Single	\$5
Family	\$8	Supporting	\$12
Newsletter Posted: Membership subscription plus \$5			

SUPPER ROSTER for 1988

Apr: P. Shaw, E. Hall

May: J. Buntine, E. Warne

THE MONTH OF MARCH

LARGE EGRET was observed on Harcourt North reservoir by P. West on 28/2/88. Several members visited the reservoir on 11/3/88, and the Egret was still present. This is a new record for Harcourt North Reservoir.

LARGE BLACK CORMORANT was observed also seen on Harcourt North reservoir on 11/3/88, again a new record for the reservoir.

WHITE COCKATOOS are still common in the town area. On Mar 5th a small flock was observed feeding on a pine tree in the Anglican Church grounds. They were using their beaks to open the young pine cones. The Cockatoos have been feeding too on Almonds. It seems that few townspeople will get a crop this year.

ADDITIONS TO THE PLANT LIST -all for area 0

Fennel (**Foeniculum vulgare*) growing along the Loddon
Cat's Ear (**Hypochoeris radicata*) also along the Loddon
Narrow-leaf Clover (**Trifolium angustifolia*) Loddon
Curled Dock (**Rumex crispus*) Along the Loddon
Prostrate Knotweed (*Polygonum prostratum*) Harcourt
North Reservoir and at a farm dam near Eddington.
Verbena (**Verbena bonariensis*). Along the Loddon
Tree Violet (*Hymenanthera dentata*). At edge of Loddon.

SOOTY TREECREEPER AT MUCKLEFORD. White-throated Treecreepers and Brown Treecreepers are quite common birds in the district, but a Sooty Treecreeper is much less common. One such bird was found by Geoff Sitch. It had entered his stove via the flue. It was able to be rescued, and will no doubt, return in time to the White-fronted variety.

CRIMSON ROSELLAS AT MUCKLEFORD. A pair have been reported near a well known Nursery on the Maldon Road. Although fairly common in spring, they are rather unusual in Autumn.

MIDGE LARVAE. At the March meeting G. Broadway showed some Midge larvae, collected from a local pond, where they were particularly numerous. These larvae are unusual as they are surrounded by a transparent tube.

CASTLEMAINE F.N.C. Inc. P.O. Box 324, Castlemaine 3450.

Committee: George Broadway (Pres), Barbara Maund (Sec),
Maggie Oliver (VP), Rita Mills (Newsletter), Kaye Turner
(Program Sec), Ern Perkins (Treas), Margaret Dunne,
Geoff Sitch, Robyn Holden, Gunter Liebl, Elma Kelly.
Librarian: Lesley Perkins.

CASTLEMAINE F.N.C. AGENDA

Fri 8 April. SKIN DIVING IN CORSICA with Gunter Liebl.
8.00 p.m. at the High School.

Sat 9 April. NEW KOALA PARK and DOG ROCKS. Leave
S.E.C., Mostyn St., at 1.30 p.m.

Thurs 14 April. THE NEW MINES ACT. Special Club
meeting at 38 Campbell St to consider a Club response
to the proposed new mines act. 7.30 p.m.

Thurs 21 April. THE NEW MINES ACT. Special meeting of
the W.V.F.N.C.A., Maryborough F.N. clubrooms. 8.00 p.m.

Sun 24 April. MT TALBOT FOREST. B.O.C. excursion led
by Harry Barclay. Meet Clunes P.O. at 10.00 am.

Sat 7-Sun 8 May. MELVILLE CAVES CAMPOUT. Club campout
at Melville Caves. Meet Railway Goods Shed, Kennedy St
at 10.30, Saturday. Walk along Back Road begins 1.30.
On Sunday, leave Lower Camping Ground for walk at 10.00.

Fri 14 May,. RAISING ORPHAN ANIMALS with Beri Perry,
and a display of the orchid and wildflower paintings of
Alice Newell. 8.00 p.m. at High School.

Sat 15th May. THE SHELBOURNE AREA. Birdwatching N.W. of
Maldon. Meet S.E.C., Mostyn St at 1.30 p.m.

Fri 11th June. SALINITY IN NORTH CENTRAL VICTORIA with
Roger Standen. 8.00 p.m. at the High School.

Sat 12th June. SALINITY IN THE AXEDALE AREA.

Sun 13th June. MUCKLEFORD, NUGGETTY. Excursion with
Geelong F.N.C. Followed by evening program.

Mon 14th June. CLYDESDALE AREA with Geelong F.N.C.

Sat-Sun 27-28 Aug. BALLARAT CAMPOUT with W.V.F.N.C.A.

Sat 10th Sept. THE GRAMPIANS with Jane Calder.

Sat 17th Sept. TARNAGULLA. Combined excursion with
Maryborough and St Arnaud F.N.C..

Sat 1st Oct. BICENTENARY WALK THROUGH KALIMNA
2.00 pm; meet outside high school (Lawson Pde)

Fri 21st Oct. WARBY RANGES. W.V.F.N.C.A. campout
8.00 p.m. Fri: Orchids with Roger Briggs.
9.00 a.m. Sat: Excursion to Warby Ranges
6.30 p.m. Sat: Annual meeting of W.V.F.N.C.A.
8.00 p.m. Sat: Booklaunching - Plants of NE Vic.
9.00 a.m. Sun: Excursion to Reef Hills, Benalla